



A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO DUCK HUNTING IN MONTANA

Basic advice on one of the state's least crowded hunting opportunities



BY DAVE CARTY

Montana is famous as a big game state. But there are ducks here everywhere you look, from teal nesting in the Bitterroot Valley to migrating pintails at Freezeout Lake to late-season mallards winging across the eastern prairies.

You wouldn't know that from most Montana hunting books and articles. The focus is almost exclusively on elk, pronghorn, deer, and other big game—with the occasional mention of upland birds. But waterfowling has its own allure. At the risk of bringing even more participants into one of the least crowded hunting opportunities in Montana, I'm prepared to tell you why it's so appealing and how to get started.

There are three basic ways to hunt ducks. The first and simplest is jump shooting. Find a creek or canal, get permission from the landowner, walk along the banks until you flush a duck, then shoot the bird as it rises off the water. (Though legal, shooting a bird on the water is considered unethical.) Or sneak up on a pond or stock dam until you get close enough to jump a duck.

This type of waterfowling is not particularly challenging (though it's amazing how often a hunter can miss a big mallard rising straight up into the air—the trick is to shoot above the bird). But if all you want is a duck din-

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ner for Christmas, jump shooting requires little in the way of time and equipment. You don't even need camouflage clothing.

The second technique is pass shooting. Hide where ducks fly by and then waylay the birds, usually at dawn and dusk as they move between feeding and resting areas. Pass shooting is a bit more like the classic duck hunting you read about in old waterfowling journals. It requires some knowledge of duck movement and the ability to lead a fast-flying bird with your shot. Besides a shotgun, the only gear required is a camo coat and hat to hide you from ducks as they fly overhead.

The third way to hunt ducks is with decoys. This is the classic method you see on TV outdoors shows or read about in the sporting press. Decoys trick the birds into coming close to your blind. Like bugling an elk or calling a wild turkey, fooling a flock of mallards so they set their wings and drop into your spread is one of the most thrilling aspects of hunting.

Hunting with decoys can also be the most difficult, complicated, and expensive way to

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put waterfowl in the bag. Though not always. I spent years hunting ducks with little more than a shotgun, six to twelve decoys, a cheap duck call, chest waders, and a dog. Call it the starter package. You can purchase much more stuff than that, but you really don't need to. Wait until you're hooked on

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waterfowl hunting before mortgaging your house to buy a duck boat, trailer, four dozen decoys, handmade calls, and the multitude of other paraphernalia filling hunting catalogs.

For a shotgun, almost all waterfowlers use a 12-gauge. A very good wingshot could get by with a 16- or 20-gauge. And I know of at least one fellow who hunts over decoys with a 28. But ducks are big, resilient birds, and all but the very best shooters will be most successful using a 12-gauge.

What's more, steel and other nontoxic loads required for hunting ducks in national

wildlife refuges—often Montana's best waterfowling spots—are most readily available in 12-gauge. It would be heartbreaking to drive all the way to Malta and be unable to find steel shot for your smaller gun.

Jeff Herbert, assistant chief for the FWP Wildlife Division, has been hunting ducks in Montana and elsewhere for decades. He switched to using steel exclusively for both waterfowl and upland birds years ago. He and I have hunted together on several occasions, and we agree that the key to killing ducks is knowing how to place your shots. With ducks, you need to lead the bird—usually by several feet or more. “Side shots and angled shots on birds overhead require some kind of sustained lead that you determine before pulling the trigger,” Herbert says.

The trick to putting ducks in the bag isn't to use bigger shells or larger shot—for the record, Herbert uses size 3—but rather to practice shooting and estimating range. “Look at life-sized silhouettes or live birds with a range finder and see what they look like within your effective shooting range,” Herbert says.

As for decoys, a person can spend anywhere from \$25 for a dozen plastic models made in Korea to several hundred dollars for just one hand-crafted model. High-



INCOMING Ducks that fly straight in to your blind require no lead. Cover the bird with the end of the barrel and then fire as it comes into range. Right: Duck hunters move only their eyes while an overhead flock tries to decide whether to land.





ON THE WATERFRONT Among the many appeals of duck hunting (clockwise from left): observing the grace and beauty of waterfowl in flight; setting a decoy spread that looks like a real flock of resting birds; watching your hunting buddy keep vigilance on the sky; finally luring a drake into shooting range.



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quality decoys will certainly help attract birds, but I've done fine with the bargain models found in most sporting goods stores. As for number, more is not necessarily better. Waterfowlers who hunt scaup, canvasbacks, and redheads on big, open water will often use up to 100 decoys. But a dozen is usually adequate when hunting on marshes, ponds, and spring creeks for "puddle" ducks such as mallards, wigeon, and teal.

A duck call is another item that can cost the good part of a paycheck. Some hand-carved models run several hundred dollars each. But over the years, I've shot scores of ducks over decoys using a cheap Lohman single reed I bought long ago in a hardware store. Another favorite duck call was given to me by a buddy who spends hours practicing his calls and travels across the country to hunt waterfowl. It's a Haydel's clear plastic double-reed that still sells for under \$15.

Waders are essential for most duck hunting. Regular fishing waders are fine as long as they are chest high. There's nothing worse than shipping a gallon of ice-cold river water into hip boots on a brisk December morning, then sitting in a blind while your toes go numb. Cold-weather hunters might consider buying a pair of thick neoprene boot-foot waders.

Montana is filled with waterfowling spots. Thanks to the state's stream access law, virtually all of the Yellowstone, Missouri, and other large rivers are open to waterfowl hunting along the bank up to the high-water mark. That's a lot of water and a lot of potential hunting. (Note that the law does not give access to surrounding private land, even if a duck you shoot falls there. To retrieve a bird on private land, or to access a river across private land, you need the landowner's permission.)

Many reservoirs and waterfowl refuges provide decent hunting, though they draw crowds on opening weekend. Freezout Lake, Canyon Ferry Reservoir, and Bowdoin, Medicine Lake, and Benton Lake national wildlife refuges are among the better known. Dozens of smaller reservoirs and lakes and



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countless streams and wetlands also provide excellent shooting. Scouting is critical. Talk to friends, study maps, and drive around to locate promising places on your own.

Finding spots that crowds ignore is worth the extra legwork. I spent years hunting a channel I discovered on the Missouri River and had some of the best shooting of my life there. With the surge of new residents, the spot is no longer the secret it used to be. But plenty of others are still out there. Even though I've been duck hunting in Montana for more than two decades, I'm still always out scouting for new spots.

Once you find a place to hunt, the next step is to decide where to set your decoy spread. That means figuring out where flying ducks will want to land. Nothing attracts ducks better than decoys placed in a spot the birds have been using and want to revisit. That requires scouting the water beforehand to see where ducks land, feed, and loaf. Effective decoy placement can make even a mediocre caller like me look good.

Set decoys in the water several yards out and to the side of your shoreline blind. That way, ducks will land directly in front of you. Keep in mind that ducks land into

the wind and will usually come in a bit short of your decoys.

Learning to call ducks isn't difficult, though mastering it takes years. Buy a few of the many instructional CDs and DVDs available. They are produced by people who quack at more ducks in a month than I'll see in my lifetime. Don't get caught up in the endless nuances of calling, at least not at first. Although you may eventually learn two dozen or more different calling sequences, a beginner needs to know only the basic hail call and the single quack.

Knowing when to call is more important than learning many calls. Hit distant birds with a loud hail call until they turn. Crank down the volume while they're swinging overhead, and then coax them in with single quacks or soft hail calls whenever they swing away. When the ducks turn again and appear to be coming in, stop calling and pick up your shotgun.

Using a duck call is not essential. In fact, you can often lure more ducks by just being quiet, as long as you've put your decoys in a place the birds want to be. This is especially true on heavily hunted public marshes, where every hunter and his brother are tooting away.

As for dogs, you don't always need one for duck hunting. Young and nimble waterfowlers who hunt over small bodies of water can usually retrieve their own ducks. But on big lakes and rivers, dogs are essential. Also, dogs add immeasurably to the quality of any duck hunt. I've come to appreciate that even more since my springer spaniel died 20 years ago and most of my duck hunting since has been without canine companionship. Getting a dog is a large commitment in time and money, but a good Lab, springer, or "versatile" retriever (such as a griffon or German wirehair) will find birds you thought you'd lost—and a few you never knew you hit. You'll have far more fun even on slow days and will forever bore friends with tales of your dog's heroics afield. Better still, your canine buddy will never criticize your shooting or tire of your lame excuses for missing. Try that with your other hunting pals. 🐾



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CALL OF THE WILD DUCK Knowing when and how to use a duck call can lure reluctant birds into shooting range. But calls aren't essential, and poor calling—which ducks quickly detect as fake—is usually worse than no calling at all. Montana duck hunters see a wide range of species, including mallards, pintails, redheads, canvasbacks, shovelers, and gadwalls (above right), also known as gray ducks. A Labrador or other good retrieving breed (below) is not essential for duck hunting. But a dog can make the hunt easier, reduce the loss of crippled birds, and provide good company in the blind when birds aren't flying.



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